I Don't Know How To Love Him
Luke 7:36-50
May 22, 1977

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The Churches which stand in the Reformed Tradition, among them the Presbyterians, it is now obvious, have been caught unprepared by the dominant religious motif of our generation - the rennaisance of personal spirituality: a phenomenon perhaps best described by the idiom, "Born Again Christianity".

The zenith of this amazing rennaisance has been approached in the surfacing of self described "born again Christians" in the ranks of our culture's celebrity elite: entertainers - Pat Boone, Anita Bryant: athletes - too numerous to name but clustered around a very vigorous organization called the Fellowship of Christian Athletes: politicians - former Senator Hughes, former Presidential aide, Charles Colson. The zenith was achieved, however, in the election to the Presidency of Jimmy Carter, a devout southern Baptist who uses the vocabulary of the movement, attends church regularly and even teaches a Bible Class. It does not appear that the President's conversion experience was quite as dramatic and cathartic as it has been portrayed: in fact it seems to have been preceeded by a great deal of thought, study and discipline. Mr Carter sounds at times like a Presbyterian which, I am tempted to say, is what the Presidency ought to do for one - but I won't. The fact remains that his personal religion, which is no one's business but his own, became everyone's business, and that it was perceived generally as the "born again" variety. Political analysts thought it would be detrimental. Cultural analysts regard his election as a dramatic break-through on a par with the election of the first Roman Catholic President in 1960. What it signals is that "mainline religion" is no longer mainline: that normative American religion is more conservative theologically, and more personal in focus than Presbyterianism, Methodism, Episcopalianism. And if you doubt that hypothesis, consider the following statistics published in the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches and rehearsed in U.S.News and World Report recently. In the past decade some churches have slipped: United Methodist membership is down 10%: Episcopal, 15%: our United Presbyterian constituency is down 10%. In the same period of time, other churches have grown: Southern Baptists are up 18%, Assemblies of God 37%, Seventh Day Adventists 34%.

Now those statistics are far more complex than they seem. I resist vigorously the nearly automatic business conclusion that churches that grow must be doing the right things and churches that decline must be doing the wrong things. I hold out for the possibility, at least, that the reverse may be true at certain places and times in history: that churches may be doing all the right things and for that reason be declining. The New Testament, after all, is not a sales manual: Jesus was crucified for doing all the right things, and as a friend observed to me recently, "a church that doesn't get itself crucified occasionally has to ask whether it is really a part of the Body of Christ."

Nevertheless, it is my observation that Churches in the Reformed tradition have been caught unprepared to deal with a radical resurgence of the kind of spirituality characterized by conversion and rebirth. And I regard it as a matter of highest priority that we begin to do just that.

We react negatively to extremism. Part of the reason we are Presbyterians, I suppose, is that we are not on the extremities or fringes of anything. Our heritage, which is deeply engrained is to value reason over emotion; to regard personal religion as a process of growing - a becoming. Theologically, our most beautiful music is a "grace note" which holds that salvation is a gift of God in

Jesus Christ: that there is nothing further that needs to be done, beyond what happened on the cross: that to be saved is to know that we are loved by God, without condition.

In this series of sermons we have focused on the stories of people in the New Testament who became followers of Jesus Christ, attempting to allow them to inform us. We began with Simon Peter whose rebirth, I suggested, occurred when he sensed the miracle of Christ's love which remained constant in spite of Peter's denials. Last Sunday we looked at Nicodemus, an old man, a respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, with whom Jesus talked about rebirth.

This morning I wish to hold up another story. The subject is Mary Magdalene. I have borrowed the title for this sermon from her song in the Rock Opera, Jesus Christ Superstar. It seemed to describe the dilemma in which we find ourselves: I Don't Know How To Love Him.

There are no fewer than six Marys mentioned in the Gospel records. Some of them do very similar things in different Gospels and there has always been a lingering suspicion among students of the New Testament that at least several of the six are one and the same. There is also a lingering tradition that Mary Magdalene may have been the nameless prostitute whose story was told in the New Testament Lesson this morning.

What we do know is this. Mary Magdalene was one of several women who became a part of the small entourage which followed Jesus around Galilee over a period of three years. At some point Jesus had healed her of an ailment described as "casting out seven devils"; an idiom for severe mental or emotional disorder. After that she became, apparently, a very devoted follower. She was among the company which traveled to Jerusalem for Passover. She was there through the climatic events of that week and was conspicuously present at the crucifixion. She came to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week: she reported the fact of the empty tomb to the others, and shortly thereafter, alone in the garden, became the first person to experience the greatest truth of Christian faith - the reality of the resurrection.

Those are rather impressive credentials but there is much more that we don't know. Who was she? Where did she come from? What, exactly, was the nature of her illness?

For the purpose of this sermon I am going to engage in some speculation. What follows is not New Testament scholarship, but a story constructed on the basis of the few things we know about her and freely employing literary license. It is not, therefore, a true story but it may be a helpful one.

Her name tells us that she was from Magdala, a small town on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. Archeologists and historians tell us that Magdala was a very lively place. It was primarily a Gentile town; the artifacts discovered at the site are mostly pagan. Magdala was the hub of a lot of commercial activity: farming, fishing, fish curing, trading and ship building. The wealth of the city is documented by a curious anecdote: when the Romans collected taxes, the money was transported from Magdala by wagon, rather than horseback or donkey. All this conspired to make Magdala a wide-open town with a reputation for the best and most available prostitutes in the area. When Magdala was destroyed the Rabbis recorded their opinion that the tragedy was a result of the city's notorious immorality.

So let us speculate: a little girl growing up in a rich, pagan, lively city with a flourishing prostitution industry: a little girl who was a part of a despised and curious minority, under the thumb of Roman power and arrogance. Let us speculate that a young Mary assessed the whole situation and concluded that prostitution was an alternative which promised financial reward. Nothing, however, was as abhorent to the Jewish community. A prostitute paid a dear price indeed; total rejection by her family, her people, her synagogue. She was nothing. In fact they may have said that she had a demon: she was sick: out of her mind. How else could she do what she was doing? In fact, she must have had seven demons!

But one day, perhaps, Mary encountered another man, out of Nazareth, thirtyish. He did not want what all the others wanted. He didn't ask for anything and at first she was frightened. He seemed simply to see her as a person, a woman, a whole human being, not an available plaything, and not a wretched outcast. Suddenly she felt worse about herself and, at the same time, better about herself than she had ever felt before. Perhaps she found that she could talk with him. She didn't have to tell him that she was confused: that she felt guilty and angry and ashamed and cynical. She didn't have to tell him that she was a sinner. Obviously, he knew that and it had not made a difference. Somehow he could get by all that and accept her as a person of worth and dignity and value.

Suddenly she - Mary - mattered to someone. And suddenly, I propose, her condition was healed by the unconditional love: the demons of self-hatred and guilt and cynicism were banished by the strong love of this man. When he left and her professional activity needed to resume, she couldn't do it. She was a new person now: the old life had to be put behind her immediately and decisively. But what does a reformed prostitute do in Magdala? Mary decided quickly. She packed her belongings: her clothing which was far too vulgar, but all she had: even the semi-precious perfume, and set out to find him.

She followed into Galilee and caught up with him at the home of a respected Pharisee, of all places; at a dinner party. When she saw him again all the guilt and self-recrimination, the years of pent up self-loathing came to the surface: how to thank him? How to love him? Bursting into tears she threw herself at his feet and took that symbol of all that was past, the alabaster jar of perfume, and emptied it over them.

The very proper dinner host was horrified. Trying to be gracious, perhaps, he suggested that Jesus didn't know what this woman was. The significance of what she had done, however, was clear to him.

So she followed him through Galilee, to Jerusalem, right up to the foot of his cross. And when he died she kept on following to the tomb; and her following confirmed what he had done for her. He was not dead: he was still with her: the change in her was real. She was reborn: healed, forgiven and given her life back. Mary Magdalene, or the nameless woman in Luke 7 - whichever - was born again, in the love of Jesus Christ.

One of the most telling critiques of Christianity is that it seems, at times, to require its adherents to feel bad about themselves. In the hands of the Church the Gospel becomes, at times, very bad news rather than good news. People already, we are told, feel bad: Christianity often seems to confirm their worst suspicions about their own worth and value. Typically, religion would have

required a full disclosure from the woman in Luke 7. She would have to make a full confession: she would have to turn around, prove herself by living the moral life: then and only then would religion allow her to be at peace with herself.

Transactional analysis, or T.A. as it is known, became immensely popular because it identified the lack of self-esteem as a major emotional problem for many people. We play games all our lives, the psychiatrists tell us, trying to prove that we are worth something, that we are loveable, that we are OK, to use the T.A. vocabulary. And religion, tragically, sometimes seems to be the major culprit in reinforcing the whole system.

The tragedy is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is realistic about the human condition, but not morbid about it. In fact, as we contemplate that forlorn woman, kneeling at the feet of our Lord, we must conclude that the basic thing the Gospel has to say is good. It is really good news. It is that God loves you - and understands you and accepts you as you are.

It is no limp humanism that condones any variety of human behavior. Jesus did not approve of the woman's profession. That should not even need saying. What He did not do was insist that she surface all her bad feelings: He did not force her to repent as a condition of His forgiveness and acceptance. He simply accepted her and that miracle prompted her penitence. That acceptance, extended before she did a thing or said a word was the power that healed her and allowed her to do something she had not done before - to love; to show her love, to weep tears of love.

We don't know how to love anyone until we feel good about ourselves. It is that simple - and it is that which the Gospel of Jesus Christ addresses in each of us.

The late Paul Tillich put it this way: "Being forgiven and being able to accept oneself are one and the same thing...in the midst of our futile attempts to make ourselves worthy...we are suddenly grasped by the certainty that we are forgiven and the fires of love begin to burn. That is the greatest experience anyone can have. It may not happen often, but when it does happen, it decides and transforms everything." (The New Being, p.12).

That, I propose, is what happened to Mary Magdalene. She was grasped by the certainty of forgiveness and the fire of love began to burn. That is what we presume weekly when we engage in an act of corporate confession. We confess because we know God loves and accepts us. We confess because the news is good - really good. We can love one another because we are loved by God. We are free to love - wives, husbands, parents, children, friends, strangers - because we are loved. We are free to give the gift of grace to one another.

When it happens, Tillich observed, it decides and transforms everything. It opens up new life. It is what is called being born again.

Amen.

Our Father, help us - in the love of Christ - to accept ourselves. Help us really to hear the good news of Your love. And then help us to love, honestly, unconditionally: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.